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ABSTRACT

The difficulties and obstacles encountered in research in the analysis and interpretation of writing conference talk are theoretically important. These dilemmas may serve as markers to help researchers see how the routines of research and the interpretations of findings are integrally related. The ways in which talk "rearranges" problems should be of interest to those who concern themselves with the relationship of oral discourse to learning to write. Discourse analysis of classroom interaction is comprised of two phases of research: data collection, and data analysis. The use of recording equipment, and the kind of equipment used, will affect the kind of information obtained from classroom settings, as student comments demonstrate. Related to this is the need to gather contextualizing information, since student-teacher talk can be misunderstood outside of context. Often, teacher and student motives can only be attained through personal interviews, as examples show. The timing of interviews, furthermore, affects what is discovered in the data. The dilemmas of when and how to collect data affect all aspects of a study and affect what the data can teach. Other phenomena of importance when considering conferences are "adjacency pairs" and the question of who is "steering," (invariably the teacher, as illustrated in one scenario). In sum, all of these obstacles make the responsibility of interpretation a challenging process replete with methodological paradoxes. (HB)

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Discourse Patterns in One-to-One, Teacher-Student Writing Conference Conversations

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I'm going to talk today--not about discourse patterns in one-to-one teacher-student writing conference conversations, as the title in the program suggests--but about the research road that one travels in order to be able to analyze and interpret writing conference talk. I'm going to discuss selected rocks in the road, dilemmas and obstacles, of which there are many. The point I wish to make is that the rocks, though they trip us up, are theoretically important. They are part and parcel not only of our methodological routines, but, also, of our understandings and interpretations of findings. In fact, the rocks may serve as markers to help us see how the routines of research and the interpretations of research findings are integrally connected.

I first need to say that when we analyze writing conference conversations for patterns of discourse, we uncover critical links between oral and written language, between social interaction and the thinking processes associated with writing, between teacher-student collaboration and student learning, and that is why we undertake such research in the first place. On these points, I wish to quote Barnes, because he captures why I find the analysis of teacher-student conversation worth the dilemmas and obstacles that in part constitute the work:

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> Often when we meet a problem we want to talk it over [SAYS BARNES]; the phrase 'talk it over' seems to imply something other than communicating ideas already formed. It is as if the talking enabled us to rearrange the problem so that we can look at it differently.

The ways in which talk "rearranges" problems is of special interest to those of us who concern ourselves with the relationship of oral discourse to learning to write. The premise is that the structure of linguistic interaction in learning contexts such as the teacher-student writing conference plays a major role in the building of writing knowledge and meaning. Conversations in and of themselves have been observed to be prototypical language events, the form of language that everyone is first exposed to and hence the "matrix" for language acquisition (LEVINSON). And the writing conference, while conversational in structure, is a special kind of conversation. It is neither casual conversation nor formal lesson, yet it incorporates features of both. We can analyse it using a variety of techniques, drawing, for example on the methods of conversational analysts or on sociolinguistic methods for examining formal classroom interactions (such as the well-known studies of classroom lessons done by Mehan some years ago). Discourse analysis is not a fixed procedure, but a varying and flexible methodology. I believe that what most discourse analyses of classroom interaction have in common are the dilemmas

and obstacles that are my concern here.

I wish to address two phases of the research--though the phases are intertwined and sometimes difficult to tease apart. The first is the data collection phase, the second, data analysis.

To refamiliarize us with collecting and analyzing writing conference talk, I need to mention that such collection and analyses often--and, I would argue, should--consider the place of the writing conference in the broader instructional context . . . as that context is shaped by the teacher and students in the classroom and embedded in the life of the school and the community. Most analyses have in common a focus on the structure of writing conference talk--for example, patterns of raising and changing topics of conversation, of monitoring talk, of asking and answering questions, and of giving and following directions. And analyses focus, too, on the substance of talk--such concerns as the elements of the student's paper, or the student's writing process. With this in mind, here is a scenario.

Lisa, a student in Mr. Peterson's ninth-grade English class, tells me in an interview what it was like to have her class recorded on camera every day for six weeks.

> Me: Um . . Lisa. We, as you know, did a lot of videotaping. /uh huh/ And we've all these videotapes that we're going to be looking at over the summer. And we were hoping that some of the kids that we talked to would help us look at the tapes and help us kind of

give us a sense of what was going on in the class.

L: [LISA SAYS] Oh yeah. Sure.

Me: Would you be able to do that?

L: Yes.

Me: Great.

[AND THEN SHE CONTINUES]

L: Because I don't think you will be able to find out what our classroom was, because . . . You know. Usually we'd, you'd be sitting there picking your teeth but the camera's there, and you don't, you know. Geraldine once wanted to blow her nose, but she didn't because she was embarrassed.

Now, the other side of the coin. At the end of the time in which my research team and I collected data in Mrs. Vance's 11th grade literature class, students did a free-writing in class about what it was like to have researchers in the classroom every day for a semester. These writings were done anonymously. The responses in large part centered on the taping. Many students wrote about experiencing a growing ease with the equipment. "At first it was strange having them in the class, but then I got used to it," wrote one student. "At first I thought it was stupid, but then I was flattered to be studied," wrote another. "It felt empty in here when the new semester started and they weren't here with all their equipment and things," someone else wrote. And so it went. These reactions are different from Lisa's, but the issue, I think, is the same. The use of recording equipment, and the kind

of equipment used, will affect the kind of information obtained. It goes without saying that video cameras record non-verbal cues that elude audio recording. Yet video cameras are often more intrusive pieces of equipment whose presence can potentially alter the nature of teacher-student interaction. Whether Geraldine's communication patterns, or Lisa's, or anyone else's in Mr. Peterson's class were affected by such needs as maintaining face in front of a camera is a question that we will never be able to answer. Likewise, whether the <u>familiar</u> feeling that some students in Mrs. Vance's class expressed about our research team and our equipment in fact affected the ways in which their communication patterns changed over time--the familiarity, they indicated, grew the longer we were there--is also an unanswerable question. When research questions about teacher-student conferences include such variables as change in discourse over time, a question that has been important to me, the issue of growing familiar with the equipment is central--though many researchers who gather taped data argue that because students do become familiar with the equipment, equipment becomes a relative non-issue.

A related issue is the gathering of contextualizing information. If teacher-student talk is to be understood in context, it is desirable, indeed critical, to obtain a variety of contextualizing data, including information that can only be obtained from interviews with teachers and students--for instance, teacher and student motives for giving or completing

particular writing assignments, their reactions to certain classroom activities, or their own histories as teachers and students of writing. While such information can be critical when we analyze teacher-student discourse, the timing of such interviews can affect what one discovers in the data.

Janine had several writing conferences with Mrs. Vance on a lit. crit. paper. that she wrote fall semester--when we observed Mrs. Vance's classroom. At the end of spring semester, seven months later, I held an interview with Mrs. Vance about the students in her class. In this interview, she remembered her fall-semester conferences with Janine, and offered, unasked, the following:

> One day we were talking [MRS. VANCE AND JANINE] and she wanted a specific word in a sentence, and I said, well, draw a (blank) line, go ahead, and come back to it. No, I want the word now. And she actually blocked herself and wouldn't go on until she had the word in there and she was frustrated with me because I couldn't get into her head and come out with the word she needed. . . .

Then, a bit later, she speaks more about Janine, and a group interview assignment Janine did in which the interviewee was Janine's father and the topic of the interivew was his experience during World War II. Mrs. Vance offered this:

> Three of them had interviewed her dad and were talking about what that experience -- as a freedom fighter in Hungary -- was like, and umn, it struck me that umn, her father as a twelve-year-old used to dodge Nazi tanks and run around.

> And one time he was playing tag with this tank and the tank gunner officer turned the turret around and tried to shoot him, . . and blew up his barn. His parents were furious with him for playing tag with this tank. It was completely about the kind of life that he has led and he comes to this country and I'm sure he brought with him that very rigid (defying of the Nazis). . . So my approach to her (JANINE) was thinking of probably what it was like in her home and how she had to survive there . . . and I have just assumed that that played itself out and her survival thing is "NO, I want this word now!"

Knowing this information, knowing, too, that Mrs. Vance offered it spontaneously in an interview that took place at least seven months following the writing conference with Janine, it is very difficult to analyze Janine's writing conference discourse, especially the day when she was insisting that Mrs. Vance give her the right word for her sentence, without bearing the whole of this contextualizing information in mind--not so much the information that Janine's father was a freedom fighter in Hungary, which I could have found out by reading the text of Janine's interview with her father--but (a) that Mrs. Vance needed to think of this when she was talking to Janine, treating her with kid gloves--something that emerged also in the comments Mrs. Vance wrote on Janine's papers, and (b) that this stayed in her mind for seven months and that she found it something worth bringing up when she and I had <u>our</u> interview.

. . . That the timing of such interviews affects what one discovers in the data raises two issues: one, interviews held during the observation period potentially alter the classroom context just by bringing to participants' consciousness previously unexpressed or undiscovered ideas about the teaching and learning of writing, or by emphasizing ideas already in mind. When surfaced, such ideas may shape what subsequently gets talked about in class or in conference and how talk proceeds. However, as it is often desirable in interviews to obtain information about specific classroom activities that occurred on specific days, waiting, sometimes for months, to ask about such activities may mean trying to retrieve information that is no longer fresh in participants' minds, information that grows . . . or shrinks in participants' memories, even when their memories are "jogged" by listening to or watching tapes of the activities in question. When Mrs. Vance talked about Janine, her most vivid and salient memory was that one conference, to which she attached a good deal of meaning. This dilemma of interview collection--when to do it--becomes important to analysis: the way in which an interviewee remembers, what she recalls and what she forgets--<u>all</u> contextualize the data.

The dilemmas of when and how to collect data affect all aspects of a study and affect what the data can teach. The second kind of dilemma does not pop up until data coding and analysis begin, but it also affects the data in similar ways.

<u>Scenario</u>. Mrs. Vance has a writing conference with Kenneth

about a troubling paper, an argumentative essay about the novel White Dawn by James Houston. Their conversation begins with Mrs. Vance's question (OVERHEAD):

(1) V: Now what can I do to help you make it clear?

(2) K: Actually=

(3) V: =You know what you did wrong?

(4) K: Yeah. Because I didn't state my thesis /yeah/ clearly.

(5) V: If you don't have any- it's like- if you don't know where you're going, you can't possibly get there.

(6) K: True. I guess that's it. (laughs)

For the purposes of understanding writing conference discourse, I have looked at adjacency pairs, that is, pairs of questions-answers, offers-accepts, requests-compliances, a standard linguistic procedure. I have found that by examining discourse syntagmatically I have been able to get a handle on the kinds of initiative different participants take in helping the conversation along--to know who is asking the questions, making the offers, requesting information, for example, is to know who is doing the steering. Given the patterns of interaction that reflect this "steering," we have been able to portray such phenomena as teacher-student collaboration in the writing conference context. The "steerer," not surprisingly, is invariably the teacher. Look, again, at the exchange between Mrs. Vance and Kenneth:

(1) V: Now what can I do to help you make it clear? [SAYS MRS. VANCE, INITIATING THEIR CONVERSATION WITH A QUESTION]

(2) K: Actually=

(3) V: =You know what you did wrong? [ANOTHER QUESTION]

[KENNETH ANSWERS]

(4) K: Yeah. Because I didn't state my thesis /yeah/ clearly.

[AND MRS. VANCE OFFERS THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION:]

(5) V: If you don't have any- it's like- if you don't know where you're going, you can't possibly get there.

[AN OFFER THAT KENNETH ACCEPTS:]

(6) K: True. I guess that's it. (laughs)

Yet conversations are complex constructions. Let me quote Levinson on conversational turns: "As each turn is reponded to by a second [SAYS LEVINSON], we find displayed in that second an analysis of the first by its recipient." A close look at this brief exchange between Kenneth and Mrs. Vance shows us that, if we squint, that is, if we change perspective, what is second can be seen as first: Mrs. Vance's turn #1 is indeed an initiating question: Now what can I do to help you make it clear? Yet it is a question that is in effect a response to Kenneth's being present at the writing conference, to his presenting to her a paper to discuss, itself an initiating move. Likewise, one can argue that her re-casting in turn 3--you know what you did wrong?--while indeed another question, is also a response to Kenneth's turn #2, his tentative "actually." "Actually" serves as both partial answer . . to Mrs. Vance's turn #1 . . and as prompt, leading to turn #3, which is at once new question and response to turn #2. Kenneth's turn #4, "Yeah. Because I didn't

state my thesis clearly," is both answer to Mrs. Vance's turn #3, and a kind of offer of new information that elicits Mrs. Vance's turn #5: If you don't have any- it's like- if you don't know where you're going, you can't possibly get there.

This kind of shifting of adjacency pairs is not ignored by linguists--Herb Clark's work on conversational "contributions" examines this phenomenon in depth. Not surprisingly, analyzing and coding conference data for adjacency pairs is an obstacle in the analysis process. Though one can train coders and obtain coding reliability, the process is laborious. That the process is laborious, however, is, a theoretically appealing problem. Our labors help us to see the complexity of the conversational process. So, when imposing what come to be felt as artificial boundaries on conversational turn pairs, we begin to <u>interpret</u> the pairings with these complexities in mind. Teachers may indeed steer talk, but something is happening on the other end to prompt the steering. The case of Donald, a quiet student in Mr. Peterson's class, illustrates this point. Donald's many silences in the course of his conference talk with Mr. Peterson I finally conceived of as conversational turns--turns that prompted Mr. Peterson to say more--to fill in the awkward silent moments. While Mr. Peterson was in one sense the more vocal, the more active, the more directive participant, he could not be seen as such without the perspective of Donald as silent manipulator. The obstacle to coding--that is, the terribly difficult time one has in figuring out how to break conversation down and name it--

in fact gives us a way to understand what is going on in the conversation.

In sum, the obstacles I've had time to discuss are but a few that I--and other researchers-- have encountered in the process of studying teacher-student writing conference discourse. Knowing that obstacles constitute the process makes the process a little easier to put up with, but it makes the responsibility of interpretation a stunning burden replete with methodological paradoxes--if one thinks about it too much.